

## STAY TUNED

A column for The Mirror in Federal Way, Washington (March, 2009 – part 1)

By Susan Kovalik, © 2009 Susan Kovalik

### **The Homework Myth: Too Much of a Bad Thing?**

We know that homework causes stress and conflict, frustration and exhaustion.

We tell ourselves that homework teaches our children responsibility and good work habits, reinforces what they have been taught at school and helps them become more successful learners. Or does it?

On March 3 at Mercer Island High School, Alfie Kohn, renowned educator and author, challenged this assumption in front of an audience of 500 parents and educators (half of whom were not from the island) with examples, some as near as with your own children. His five basic themes against homework assignments (as detailed in his book "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing") include:

1. A burden on parents
2. Stress for children
3. Family conflict
4. Less time for other activities
5. Less interest in learning

Kohn detailed how the "myth" surrounding the assigning of homework is contrary to research and student achievement. He asked the audience what they wanted the children to be or become. The list included lifelong learners, curious, happy, excited, engaged, caring, competent, good thinkers and other words of good intention. After writing this list down, he asked which of these attributes were supported by homework. The response was varying degrees of wondering.

Kohn noted that the pressures put on children to perform and beat the competition undermines the emotional and ethical growth of their children. In those communities where there is incredible pressure on students to excel to get into the colleges of their choice, there is a higher rate of drug use, anorexia and of students "cutting" themselves. Students find the need to outperform their peers, which he calls "psychological toxicity" that actually leads to significant intellectual loss. Students have no new ideas as homework changes their orientation toward learning. They lead controlled lives while reaching for their parents' goals and trying to meet their schools' expectations — both goals which often lead to self-alienation.

"Homework is a destructive practice; it asks students to work a 'second shift' and parents to become the enforcement agent of the school system," Kohn said. He recommends none before high school, and that high school homework should be aimed at encouraging students to think more deeply about things that matter and build excitement for possibilities ahead.

Kohn read an e-mail from a mother who explained that she had a conference with her elementary child's teacher, told her respectfully how she valued all the efforts that went into her day. Then the mother said: "I am refusing the homework in my child's best interest!"

Stay tuned.

- - - -

Susan Kovalik is the founder of the Center for Effective Learning in Federal Way.